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ABSTRACT

California state law requires a sponsoring agency to determine whether charter schools nearing the end of their term should have their charters renewed. Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) was one of the first to grant charter school status, and consequently among the first to renew school charters. The district contracted with WestEd, a nonprofit research, development and service agency, to conduct an evaluation of 13 of the district's operating charter schools (elementary, middle, and high school levels) with an emphasis on the schools whose charter terms were nearing an end. The 5-month evaluation was designed to provide one piece of information that could be brought to bear on the board's renewal decisions. This brief provides a description of LAUSD's charter schools, types of charter school sponsorship, and information regarding such problems as liaison between school and district, interaction between charter and other schools, performance goals and accountability systems, and how districts can work better with charter schools. (Contains 11 references.) (DFR)

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Creating Working Relationships

How can School Districts and Charter Schools work together effectively?

Charter schools have proliferated across the nation over the last few years, rapidly becoming an accepted part of public education systems. Since the first experiments were launched in Minnesota in 1991, 36 states and the District of Columbia have passed charter school laws (as of July 1999). In 1998 alone, five states passed charter laws and about 473 new schools opened during the 1998-99 school year. Nationwide, more than 1,200 schools are in operation.

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Once considered a radical innovation, charter schools are becoming permanent features of many school districts. For example, in the Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second largest district serving roughly 12% of California's K-12 student population, charter schools have become a part of the education mainstream. Beginning in Fall 1998, the district has required all of its schools to choose a reform strategy, and becoming a charter school is one of five designated pathways to reform that district schools can select.

Using WestEd's evaluation of 13 charter schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) as a research base (see text box on page 2), this brief draws on LAUSD's experiences implementing and supporting charter schools to highlight the difficulties in balancing the twin needs of charter school autonomy and accountability, and their implications for the ways charter schools and districts can work together. First, we identify key challenges in district-school relationships, particularly when districts are also the sponsoring agency. Then, we outline some ways in which districts and charters can work with each other more effectively. Though charter schools differ significantly from state to state and the impact of charter schools on districts was not the primary focus of our evaluation, we think these lessons from the experiences of a large urban district have relevance for other developing charter schools and the districts that sponsor (or are considering sponsoring) them. With the number of charter schools steadily increasing – e.g., in LAUSD the number of charter schools has jumped from 15 to 34 in the last year – learning what charter schools and stronger school-district relationships have to offer to the larger school system is of paramount importance.

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The Context: About the Evaluation

California, which became the second state to pass charter school legislation in 1992, is home to 158 charter schools (as of February 1999). State law requires the sponsoring agency to determine whether schools nearing the end of their term should have their charters renewed. Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), California's largest district with 668 schools and a highly diverse student population, was one of the first to grant schools charter status, and consequently, among the first to renew school charters.

The district contracted WestEd to conduct an evaluation of 13 of the district's operating charter schools (ten elementary, one middle, two high schools), with an emphasis on the five "up for renewal" schools - i.e., schools whose charter terms were nearing an end. The five-month evaluation, conducted in the first half of Spring 1998 was designed to provide one piece of information that could be brought to bear on the Board's June 1998 renewal decisions. (Other pieces included the revised charter, public testimony, and a school's self-assessment report on whether its charter goals had been met.)

Charter Schools: As Different as They Are Similar

Since the inception of the charter school movement, advocates have hoped that charter schools would not only improve teaching and learning for their own students, but that as putative models of innovation, the schools would also drive reforms in the wider public education system. At this early juncture, the picture is mixed. Recent research (Rofes, 1998; Wells, 1998), suggests that charter schools generally have only a minimal impact on other schools and the district. In our work, we did see some changes in LAUSD – for example, the district now recognizes charter schools as a reform strategy that district schools can choose.

Generally, charter schools are public schools that are granted autonomy from certain regulations in exchange for accountability for results. Each school's charter – its contract with a state or sponsoring agency – sets out what it plans to do to reach certain educational goals and outcomes within a specified period of time. In exchange for either a blanket exemption from most state codes and district regulations, or a waiver of requirements on a one-by-one basis, charter schools are held accountable for improving student performance and meeting the terms of their charter, sometimes called a "performance contract."

Yet while charter schools across the country share these characteristics, it is important to note that charter schools differ dramatically across the country. The differences depend upon a state's authorizing legislation and the sponsoring agency, both of which, as the National Study of Charter Schools notes, "may have profound implications for how *systemic* change may – or may not – result from chartering" (1998, p.9). Authorizing legislation varies significantly from state to state in the nature and extent of the autonomy it allows charter schools, the conditions of accountability and renewal, and even the type of sponsoring agencies and the kinds of charter schools permitted (see Figure 1). Depending on the legislation, the charter granting entity or "sponsor" can range from a local school board or institution of higher education to a state department of education or even an independent governing board specially created for charter schools. Different sponsoring agencies within a state may also have different expectations and requirements. For example, while some sponsoring districts may require charter schools to adhere to district standards or curriculum, other districts may not. In short, charter schools do not represent a single, unified model of reform.

Charter schools in pioneer states are just now nearing the end of their terms, and many states and sponsoring agencies have not had accountability systems in place during the entire terms of their charter schools. Nor have they monitored the progress of charter schools closely in other ways. This has made it difficult to assess the performance of students or the benefits of particular "innovations." In fact, as a recent study of charter schools suggests and our own work has also concluded, even determining what's innovative depends heavily on context[1]:

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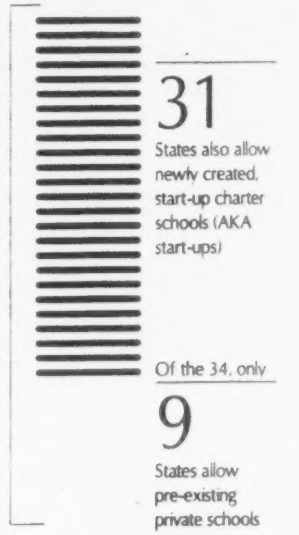
"Where progressivism reigns as local orthodoxy, a back-to-basics school signifies innovation – and vice versa. Where traditional age-grading is the norm, multi-age grouping appears revolutionary – and vice-versa."

Figure 1: Types of Charter Schools Various States Allow[4]



34 States that have passed charter school legislation allow pre-existing public schools to convert to charter status (AKA public school conversions)

31 States also allow newly created, start-up charter schools (AKA start-ups)

Of the 34, only **9** States allow pre-existing private schools to convert to charter status (AKA private school conversions)

Challenges in the District-School Relationship

Our evaluation of charter schools in Los Angeles (see text box on page 4) identified two major challenges in the relationships between districts and charter schools: 1) finding a workable balance between autonomy and accountability for charter schools that operate outside many normal regulations and policies, and 2) managing the district-charter school relationship within a large, bureaucratic, complex system.

Finding the Balance Between Autonomy and Accountability

Perhaps the most important challenge for districts (and other agencies) that sponsor charter schools is simply to define an appropriate relationship. In addressing issues of autonomy, districts must sometimes balance their desire to have charter schools meet certain district requirements, such as district goals, curriculum, or fiscal procedures, with the desire schools may have to explore new approaches in these areas. This is not always easy to do. Our research found that some district staff feel that all schools should be held accountable for implementing district standards and curriculum. Others counter that this approach could result in charter schools looking more like other district schools — working against the central goal of having charters explore alternative, break-the-mold approaches to teaching and learning.

One LAUSD high school that is applying for charter status illustrates this point well: Wanting to serve students who have traditionally not done well in school, the founders have proposed a curriculum that is quite different from that of the district. Some district staff believe that in order to be considered a full-fledged high school the school should have a curriculum that looks like that of other district high schools. Others believe that the district has not been successful with this particular population of students, and that the charter school should, therefore, be given the opportunity to try a novel curriculum.

Because state laws are sometimes vague, determining how much and what type of autonomy charter schools should have is often up to the sponsor and the charter school. In LAUSD, the degree of a charter school's autonomy depends, in part, on the degree of fiscal independence it negotiates (see Figure 2 on page 5). Schools must balance greater freedom in decision-making against increased responsibility not only for managing, but also for raising, the financial resources necessary to operate their schools. Small schools – whether conversion or start-ups – often face economy of scale issues. In particular, small public school conversions that have highly

The Context: About LAUSD

LAUSD's charter schools are diverse in terms of size, structure, and the degree of flexibility allowed. Student enrollments in elementary charter schools range from a low of 142 students to two schools with more than 1,000. Similarly, enrollments in secondary schools range from a small, alternative high school with 62 students to a comprehensive high school with 2,480 students. Of the charter schools evaluated, three are considered "fiscally independent" - exempt from most fiscal, personnel, operational and other district policies. The remaining ten schools are "fiscally dependent" - subject to district policies as they remain largely within the district operational structure; however, they may request waivers as needed. Eight of the dependent charter schools (five elementary, one middle and two high schools) share an umbrella charter and an overarching governance structure.

experienced (and as a result, more expensive) staff, and that also serve predominantly higher socio-economic, English-speaking students, may not receive additional categorical funding or any extraordinary fiscal resources, such as foundation funding. Sometimes operating under severe financial constraints, these small conversion schools may be compelled to depend heavily upon the very district from which they have sought independence and, therefore, may not attain the level of autonomy initially sought.

A related challenge sometimes faced by districts like LAUSD is clarifying — and in some cases determining — the criteria and process by which schools they sponsor will be held accountable. This is particularly difficult to do when state legislation is unclear regarding the issue of charter renewal. In California, for example, the initial legislation specified broad criteria for revoking a charter, yet left renewal criteria to the discretion of sponsors. (In recent amendments, this has been clarified.) Consistent with findings from the California state study of charter schools regarding districts' roles in holding charter schools accountable, our evaluation found that LAUSD did not have clear criteria or guidelines for renewing charter schools that had reached the end of their term. Similarly, with the exception of one school, neither schools nor the district had established a process for revising charter goals and outcomes in light of the mid-course corrections and other changes that often took place.

Managing Relationships: Administering, Supporting and Communicating with Charter Schools

Charter schools, as well as districts, need to realize that charter schools are not a cost-free reform. Districts have to balance their time and resources between dealing with their charter schools and dealing with the other public schools in their system. Providing the specialized assistance and administrative costs associated with charter schools can add up. In LAUSD, for example, the district established a committee comprising roughly 25 representatives from various departments who meet about twice a month for an hour or two to discuss issues related to charter schools. In addition, unlike most other district schools, charter schools have more frequent contact with the central office and often have direct access to the heads of particular departments. The extra time and assistance given to charter schools can create resentments among some other district schools, as well as among some district staff who view charter schools as receiving special treatment.

With charter schools comes the natural question of what kind of support districts should provide to them, particularly in areas these schools are required to address, either by the state or sponsoring agency. Special education is a good example. Newly created schools that have limited experience and capacity to deal with this highly regulated, complicated area might find they must rely on the district (as well as other resources) to help them understand and comply with federal regulations.

Finally, in large districts, establishing clear expectations for charter schools and providing timely, unambiguous answers to questions about regulations or waiver requests can be a

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challenge, largely because of the number of different departments and persons that may be involved in addressing a particular concern. In LAUSD, for instance, turnover in district personnel and in representatives who sit on the district's charter school committee has led to inconsistent directives and counsel provided by different district departments. As a result, it is often difficult to develop a unified district viewpoint on issues.

How Districts Can Work Better With Charter Schools

Having more effective relationships with charter schools requires that districts take a number of positive steps up front, from recognizing the differing needs of start-ups and conversions to encouraging and supporting better communication between charter schools and other public schools.

Plan for the Different Needs of Conversions and Start-ups

How a district establishes and maintains relationships with charter schools depends in part upon the type of each charter school. For example, in our study we found that public school conversions and start-up charter schools often present different issues for districts.

Districts working with public school conversions find themselves in the position of having to redefine a preexisting relationship. In the LAUSD example, the schools and district found that it's often harder to redefine an old relationship than to establish a new one. With conversions, there is a long history, sometimes characterized by wariness. Start-up charter schools, on the other hand, typically have little, if any, history dealing with the district and, therefore, have an easier opportunity to forge a new kind of relationship.

While public schools converting to charter status often have their curriculum and instructional programs in place, they must quickly develop the financial structures and entrepreneurial skills needed for business management and fund raising. This can be extremely challenging, especially if the school is bringing on new staff while simultaneously trying to implement new strategies.

In contrast to conversion schools, which are already operating and can adapt their curriculum, newly created charter schools must start everything up at more or less the same time. Typically, a new staff is faced with introducing a new curriculum in a new facility to new groups of students. Implementation is made even more complex by the small size of most start-up charter schools (see Figure 3 on page 7).

Newly created charter schools often require more assistance and support because of their lack of familiarity with district resources and procedures and/or applicable federal and state laws. In California, for example, there are strict laws regarding the structural soundness of school buildings given concerns about earthquakes. Whereas most conversion schools already have an approved facility, newly created schools must initially focus on locating and financing an appropriate space.

Set Clear Expectations for Charter Approval and Renewal

A key lesson revealed by our evaluation is that when districts sponsor charter schools (see text box), they should *at the outset* establish specific and clear criteria, as well as a process not just for renewal, but for approval of new charters. This clarity can help establish good school district

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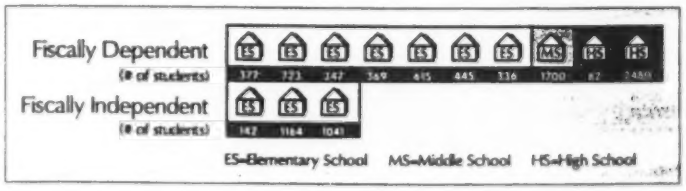
Charter schools, as well as districts, need to realize that administering and supporting charter schools is not a cost-free reform.

Figure 2: Dependent and Independent Schools in LAUSD[3]



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relationships from the start. When expectations are consistent, widely known, and mutually agreed upon, schools are more likely to see them as fair and to have fewer anxieties about how district decisions are being made.

People often forget that whether a school has lived up to the terms of its contract may be just one piece of the renewal decision. If there is also a revised charter petition – the goals and activities stated for the *next* term – it constitutes a new charter and is, therefore, subject to an approval process. Simply meeting the terms of one's old charter doesn't automatically guarantee that a school's new charter will be approved. Without that approval, a charter will not be renewed.

Consistent with the findings about charter schools from recent statewide evaluations in California and Wisconsin, we found that LAUSD had neither a written policy nor clear guidelines regarding renewal prior to the start of our evaluation. This lack of clarity caused some schools to feel confusion and heightened anxiety about the renewal process, a process that began at a time when schools had just completed writing their new petitions for the next five-year term. The absence of clear expectations and up front criteria also makes it difficult for districts to evaluate a charter school's performance and authorize renewal.

Greater clarity about what charter schools plan to accomplish, and how progress will be measured if mid-course changes or corrections are made, would also help define the terms of accountability. In our experience, districts need to consider what will happen if some targets (e.g., goals in a charter or required standards) are met and not others, or if state or district testing requirements should change midstream, thereby affecting how school performance can be realistically assessed. By thinking about contingencies, sponsoring agencies can help ensure that a renewal process is not only fair, but also helpful to schools.

This clarity can be achieved in several ways. LAUSD's Fenton Avenue Charter School, for instance, has included in its new charter a provision that the district set terms of renewal within six months of approving its second five-year charter. And the district's coordinator of charter schools, aiming for greater consistency in setting out expectations, is having each department outline what it looks for in a charter petition so that this information can be conveyed to schools in advance.

Establish a Liaison Between School and District

Having a district liaison for charter schools who is knowledgeable both about charter schools and about the district can help streamline communication between the two. LAUSD's chief strategy for coordinating charter school issues and needs has been formation of a committee comprising representatives from various divisions. In large districts, such a mechanism is probably necessary to ensure a good flow of information and greater efficiency in dealing with school requests. In addition, LAUSD's district coordinator of charter schools serves as a liaison. With established relationships to various departments, the coordinator can assist schools by quickly shepherding school requests through the appropriate district processes.

Types of Charter School Sponsorship

Though the need for clear criteria and a process for the approval and renewal of charters is one key finding of our evaluation of charter schools in LAUSD, it is important to understand that not all districts sponsor charter schools. According to a recent national study (RPP, 1999), authorizing legislation varies tremendously from state to state regarding the number and types of agencies that are allowed to grant - i.e., approve - charters. For example, of the 34 states (including the district of Columbia) which had passed charter school legislation by the 1998 legislative session, 15 states permit only local boards to grant charters. In contrast, seven states permit only the state board (and in one of these states, it's the state commissioner) to grant charters. In two states, both the local and state board must approve a charter, while in the remaining ten states multiple agencies are able to grant charters.

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Charter school representatives can also serve as liaisons. It has been suggested that better communication could be achieved by having charter school representatives sit on the LAUSD's charter school committee. Because the district coordinator and charter school operators are familiar with the practical realities and issues that surround charters, both strategies could also help the district better understand how lessons learned from charters could be applied to other district schools.

Encourage and Support Interaction Between Charter and Other Schools

Like all schools, charter schools need opportunities to learn from one another about practices that have resulted in improved teaching and student learning. In LAUSD, fiscally dependent charter schools are required, and fiscally independent charter schools encouraged, to participate in activities organized by their geographic cluster of schools (sometimes called a "complex" – consisting of a high school and its feeder schools) to address such matters as professional development. Also, some charter schools have initiated activities that encourage and support interaction with other schools about "best practices." LAUSD's Open Charter School, for instance, started "Institute" days, where its teachers exchange information about successful curriculum and instructional strategies with teachers from other schools – both charter and non-charter, both within and outside the district.

The Palisades Charter Complex, also part of our evaluation, was formed to provide greater consistency, i.e., articulated curriculum, resource sharing, schedule and event coordination, and continuity of educational vision, across all schools within the complex. Representatives from schools in the complex routinely meet in content-specific, cross-level groupings. Participants say that such meetings have resulted in improved curriculum alignment, better professional development, and greater cooperation among teachers at different schools and grade levels. Even when a complex is not composed entirely of charter schools, individual charter schools and regular public schools in the same district may find interaction mutually beneficial since students from one are likely to attend the other in later years. Districts that want to systematically gather information on best practices emerging from charter schools should provide incentives and structures that will help charter schools meet more regularly with other schools.

Help Charter Schools Align their Performance Goals with External Accountability Systems

States and local districts are increasingly adopting results-oriented accountability systems based, in large part, on test scores. Many states are putting in place three-part accountability systems: the establishment of standards coupled with a system of assessments designed

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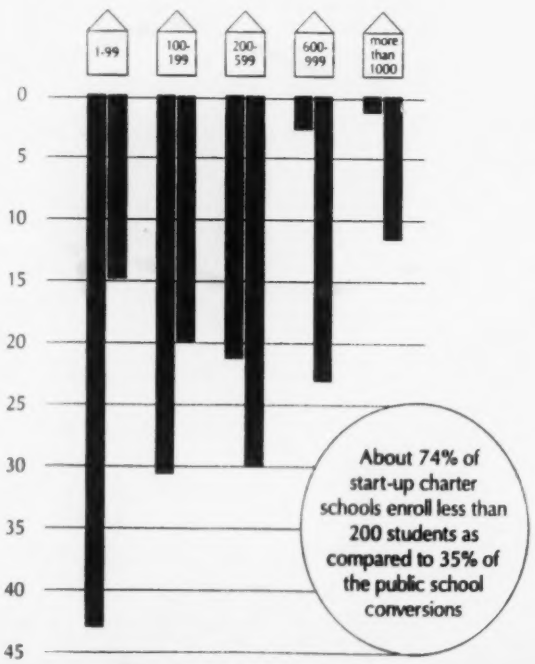
In short, simply meeting the terms of one's old charter doesn't automatically guarantee that a school's charter will be renewed.

Figure 3: Size of Start-up vs. Conversion Charter Schools[4]



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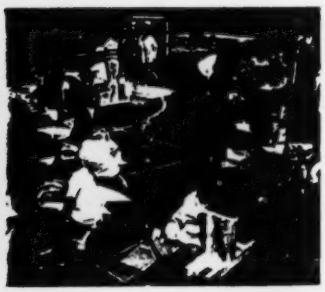
to measure student progress toward meeting those standards, accompanied by incentives and/or consequences tied to the results. (This contrasts with past decades, during which school accountability largely meant complying with a set of rules and processes delineated and monitored by the state.)

Charter petitions lay the foundation for a different kind of accountability by specifying the performance objectives the individual school hopes to achieve and the assessments that will be used to measure progress toward these standards. But these assessments, while matched to the charter's educational approach and philosophy, may not necessarily be aligned to the larger accountability systems and assessments that districts are developing or are tied to themselves. And unless noted in authorizing legislation or the charter petition, schools may not, in fact, be required to align with these broader frameworks.

Photos from LAUSD Charter Schools



That said, tension occurs when charter schools choose not to follow the same standards as districts. Forcing such alignment may be counter to the intent of many charter school laws. Yet if one hopes to compare the results of different approaches to educating students, exploring ways to better align individual charter school performance goals with new accountability systems is crucial. LAUSD strategies has attempted to create dialogue around such accountability issues. For example, the five charters up for renewal provided input on the research issues and questions for the external evaluation of their schools, which was funded by the district. And the district coordinator for charter schools has recommended that school representatives be placed on the district charter school committee, which could also advance discussions of accountability.

One comprehensive strategy for aligning standards and accountability at the individual school level with standards and the need for external accountability at the district level is the public engagement process used by the Kyosei project, part of WestEd's Western Assessment Collaborative. The project features "accountability dialogues," in which school and district partners, including parents and local business representatives, for example, work together to discuss student performance and how to improve it. The goal is to find the common ground between two groups: "those who require assessment information that provides a large-scale picture of the performance of the system and those who need richer, more contextualized information to guide instruction."[5]

Assessing and Monitoring Innovative Approaches

A major goal of charter advocates, often reflected in language regarding legislative intent, is that the charter school movement's influence be systemic, i.e., that the reforms occurring within charters have a broader impact on the district and its other schools. This can occur only if districts strengthen their relationship with charter schools and enhance their own capacity to learn more systematically about what does and does not work within their charter schools. In LAUSD, both the district and the schools agree that a charter school's demonstrated success with particular strategies can often help "open the door" for other schools that may be requesting more autonomy in the same area. For example, per pupil budgeting – considered by some to be a fiscal risk – was first attempted by fiscally independent charter schools in the district and is now the superintendent's goal for all schools over the next three years. Similarly, based

on the success of charter schools. LAUSD now allows any school to contract out maintenance and operation services that are under a thousand dollars directly, without going through the district.

Yet the ways in which the district learns from charters has thus far has been somewhat haphazard rather than being a deliberately planned effort.

Not all innovations occurring within charter schools are destined for success. Districts need to develop strategies that will help them analyze and determine just which innovations are worth recreating. At the onset of a charter petition approval, districts might consider what they could learn from a new school, as in our example of a new curriculum developed for a particular group of high school students whose needs had not been well served in the past. In this way, the approval process becomes a way of "testing" new, break-the-mold approaches. Districts may want to pay particular attention to alternative curricula, to new staffing arrangements, or to new instructional schedules. By being clear at the beginning about the opportunities to learn from charters, districts can then set up structures to monitor the ways in which charter schools are reaching or failing to reach their goals. Districts can also set up ongoing discussions between district and charter school staffs around education reforms that might benefit all schools.

How Charter Schools Can Work Better With Districts

Charters wanting to take full advantage of a district's resources must work patiently and forthrightly with their district. They must realize that while a district may want to assist, it has many other concerns and schools to which it must attend.

Realize that a Completed Petition is only the Beginning of the Approval Process

For many schools, drafting a charter petition is a time-consuming task, involving numerous meetings, several drafts and layers of review by prospective staff, parents, community members, and, even, funders. From the school's perspective, submitting the petition to the sponsor is the end of a long cycle of hard work. Yet in many districts that sponsor charter schools, particularly in large urban ones such as Los Angeles Unified, various divisions – special education, curriculum and instruction, and finance and accounting, to name but a few – must review petitions for compliance with federal and state regulations or with collective bargaining agreements that may still apply and possibly set precedents for future agreements. Petitions are also reviewed with respect to certain district policies. For example, though not the case in Los Angeles, some districts review proposals in terms of their adherence to district standards or curriculum. Changes are often requested before a proposal is approved and passed on to the next level. School board members – who ultimately approve the petition – may have still more questions and revisions.

Realizing that the process of approving (and renewing) a charter takes time, and preparing school staff and supporters for possible revisions, can take the surprise (and resentment) out of having to do additional work. In short, managing expectations about the work ahead and planning timelines that allow time for revisions and negotiations can lay the foundation for a better working relationship with the district.

Acknowledge the Need for External Accountability

While many of those who start charter schools, especially newly created start-ups, do so to realize an alternative educational vision or approach, they must still acknowledge the district's external accountability requirements. Districts need comparative information over time in order to assess charter schools as a strategy for reform. Districts without state assessments will most likely want to administer standardized tests and may want to require them of the charter schools.

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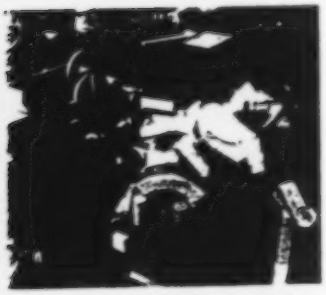
Tension occurs when charter schools do not choose of their own accord to follow the same standards as districts.

Charter schools, then, must consider how to balance the desire to follow one's own educational approach with the district's need for external accountability. For example, at LAUSD's Open School, a former magnet school with a strong child-centered, teacher-developed curriculum, staff are conscious of state and district standards and attempt to embed them within their instruction. At the same time, they feel standardized tests run counter to their goals – i.e., teachers don't want to lose sight of their child-centered approach that's focused on experiential learning. So while the school continues to administer the standardized tests other district schools use, staff are simultaneously developing their own performance-based assessments.

More photos from LAUSD Charter Schools



Develop a Strong Accountability Plan Early

Some of the schools up for renewal say they wish they had put a strong accountability plan in place from "day one." This would have helped ensure a less traumatic and time-consuming renewal process. In our study of LAUSD charter schools, schools mentioned a need for clear criteria for renewal from the district. But they also acknowledged that they learned a great deal in five years about establishing measurable goals (and needing to revise many of their original ones). Charters not only need clear goals at the outset, but also need a process in place for periodically reviewing progress toward those goals. Major changes in staff or student composition are some of the things that can change a school's goals and the ways of appropriately assessing progress towards those goals.

Build Productive Relationships with other Charter District Schools

As noted earlier, charter schools can learn from one another's experience. Throughout Los Angeles County, charter school administrators informally met about once a month to discuss specific issues and offer mutual support. More experienced charter schools provided advice and suggestions to other schools considering a conversion to charter status. Now, a formal networking team of charter schools administrators and staff from Ventura, Los Angeles, and Orange Counties meets bimonthly as part of the efforts of a statewide organization – California Network of Educational Charters – to link charter schools in the state. (Currently, nine such networks exist throughout California.)

As indicated earlier, charter schools can also benefit from working with other district schools, such as their feeder schools. Indeed, such sharing can extend their influence. For example, Vaughn Next Century Learning Center (a charter school) has offered teachers in neighboring schools the opportunity to participate in some of its on-site professional development activities.

Take Advantage of District Resources

Many parents and some staff are drawn to charter schools in part because of dissatisfaction with their former public schools. At the same time, founders need to remember that districts can be good sources of information and expertise on a variety of issues. This is particularly important to start-up charter schools that tend to be smaller in size, with fewer staff most of whom also have major responsibilities apart from classroom teaching. In such schools, one of the major challenges for staff is to learn and master new areas of responsibility while simultaneously juggling all of the tasks that go along with teaching a

new curriculum to a new group of students. Turning to the district as a quick source of information rather than mounting a new search by oneself makes sense. Our research found at least one school in LAUSD that viewed the district as a valuable source for information and assistance on a variety of issues, ranging from professional development opportunities to special education laws and strategies. Charters might also want to consider taking advantage of a district's size. For example, charter schools may be able to cut costs by purchasing some high-volume supplies from the district.

Summary: Challenges Abound, But So Do Opportunities

Clearly, districts and charter schools face many challenges – challenges that are likely to mount as charters become, as the National Study of Charter Schools puts it, "an accepted part of the landscape of public education." More than two-thirds of the states now have charter legislation, and the budding enthusiasm for charters may very well be accompanied by trepidation on the part of districts long accustomed to having full control of their schools.

In LAUSD, both charter school and district staff have come to believe that trying to work through these concerns – by building productive relationships and opportunities for dialogue – is essential. In our work, both charter schools and the district see some real benefits in the existence of charter schools (see Figure 4). And the growth in charters experimenting with new approaches can help districts and educators learn more about what works well for certain students and their communities. By breaking down old barriers, setting clear goals and expectations, and creating more opportunities for critical dialogue around such issues as professional development and accountability, charter schools and districts have an opportunity to transform the educational landscape.

Figure 4: Lessons Learned About the Benefits and Drawbacks of Charter Schools

SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE		DISTRICT PERSPECTIVE
Ability to set and stay an independent programmatic course	BENEFITS	Provide educational options for teachers as well as parents/students
Expenditure decisions made and executed quickly		Open door in risky/uncertain areas for other schools
Strong internal accountability and more unified school culture		Opportunity for schools to try alternatives
More and different opportunities for leadership		Opportunity to learn what works, what doesn't
Steep learning curve on "business" side for public school conversions	DRAWBACKS	Administrative costs
Must establish small business infrastructure and educational program simultaneously		Difficulty upholding consistent expectations
Some schools must balance school educational direction with district priorities or state mandates		Lack of internal capacity to monitor progress for R&D
Increased time demands for staff, possibility of burn out		Balance accountability pressures with the granting of permission to break the mold
Staff must balance new duties with time for the professional development needed to make coherent changes in curriculum and instructional		Loss of revenue
"Magnifying lens" stress		Increasing legal questions and issues

Endnotes

1 Manno, B., Finn Jr., C., Bierlein, L., and Vanourek, G. "Charter Schools: Accomplishments and Dilemmas, *Teachers College Record*, Volume 99, Number 3, Spring 1998, p. 543.

2 Data taken from RPP International's, *A National Study of Charter Schools: Third-Year Report (1999)*, p. 12.

3 Data taken from WestEd's, *The Findings and Implications of Increased Flexibility and Accountability: An Evaluation of Charter Schools in Los Angeles Unified School District, Cross-Site Report (1998)*, p. 8.

4 Data taken from RPP International's, *A National Study of Charter Schools: Third-Year Report (1999)*, p. 21.

5 Jamentz, K., "Authentic Accountability," *Thrust for Educational Leadership*, Volume 27, Number 4, January 1998, p. 38.

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Visit the US Charter School's website at uscharterschools.org.

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